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# Remembering the Vikings: Ancestry, cultural memory and geographical variation

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## Abstract

The Vikings are an excellent example of the significance of cultural memory: from post-Viking-Age sources to their rediscovery in the Victorian period to their popular appeal in current times. Ancestry is a key dimension as vikings could be dynasty founders or imbue a region with Scandinavian heritage. The importance of settlements remaining connected with Iceland and the Old Norse cultural milieu is highlighted. Archaeological evidence and non-Scandinavian sources can highlight the gaps in Norse memory, where specific events have been forgotten and some regions of the Viking world have received less attention than others. Stretching from America to Russia, the impact of post-medieval political events, of modern marketisation and of different scholarly approaches is also considered.

## KEYWORDS

1000–, 1099, 500–999 CE, Atlantic world, Britain & Ireland, dynasties, Europe, historiography, literature, local and regional history, migration, nations and peoples

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

With the exception of terse inscriptions and some contemporary poetry, sources from the perspective of the Scandinavian 'Vikings' in general postdate the Viking Age, conventionally the period covering the 8th to 11th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Thus, these historical sources are largely not from the perspective of those who raided, voyaged and settled, but from that of their descendants. The sources' retrospective nature means that the impact of memory is vital for

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attempts at understanding the Viking Age. In addition, memory and maintenance of Norse cultural aspects can be used to extend the chronology into the 'long broad Viking Age', as advanced by Jesch (2015, pp. 10, 55). This article focuses on geographic breadth without such long chronology, beginning with how memories were shaped immediately after the traditional dates of the Viking Age and later considering more recent national and regional reception. I retain upper case for Viking Age and for the Viking world, but use lower case 'vikings' in military and seafaring contexts following recent scholarly convention drawing on the word's original meaning as a job description rather than an ethnic label (see Brink, 2008a, p. 3; Brink, 2008b, pp. 5–6; Cross, 2018, p. xii). The term 'Norse' will be used with reference to language and literature and to speakers of Old Norse in Scandinavia and beyond.

Cultural memory is enacted by the sources available to historians. The 2018 publication of the *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies* draws attention to 'memory' as a valuable lens of scholarly enquiry in medieval Scandinavian studies, but its focus is more literary than historical (Glauser et al., 2018a). Continued stories and remembrances of the Scandinavian vikings are increasingly seen to have been a 'living tradition' and not simply derivative of earlier tales (Parker, 2018, p. 101). This article explores the further potential for developing memory as a methodology, organising relevant research into the novel categories of remembered vikings, forgotten vikings, rediscovered vikings and contemporary regionalised heritage. It seems appropriate to begin with the *Handbook's* conception of memory, drawing on Jan Assmann's definition of a 'contemporized past' (Assmann, 1988, p. 129), that the focus is 'on the memory of the past, on how people remember, and why' (Glauser et al., 2018b, p. 8). This article suggests that such cultural memory, and its interaction with historiographical developments, has fed into, or even distorted, Viking scholarship.

This article examines how some settlements outside Scandinavia have been better remembered than others. It therefore focuses on vikings abroad, rather than on Norway, Denmark and Sweden themselves. Non-Scandinavian sources provide an invaluable opportunity to assess the impact of memory: an insight into what has been forgotten and what has been emphasised in the commemoration, in contrast to a more stationary, isolated society than vikings. Archaeological evidence further reveals viking activity in areas which are poorly served by recorded memory. Scholarship has focused on some regions and aspects more than others, albeit not always consciously. While the impact of nationalism and politics on scholarship of mainland Scandinavia has long been recognised, how this phenomenon shapes our understanding of the settlements outwith Scandinavia must also be considered. Various layers of memory regarding vikings emerge: later Norse curation; early modern and Victorian rediscoveries; scholarly tradition; contemporary public interest. These different strands are, of course, connected and even dependent on each other.

## 2 | RECALLING ORIGINS IN THE SCANDINAVIAN SETTLEMENTS

From the 11th century onwards, Scandinavian settlements remembered their viking ancestry in a variety of ways, but common themes emerge. This section surveys these memorialisations, particularly origin stories, ancestor figures and naming practices. The settlement (*landnám*) of Iceland (c. 870–930) is seen as the key moment in its history, with the first settler, Ingólfr Arnarson, being memorialised to this day (Höfig, 2018, p. 762). In constructing the Icelandic past, 12th-century author Ari Þorgilsson claimed in *Íslendingabók* that the settlement resulted from independently minded Norwegians fleeing the tyranny of King Harald Fairhair; this foundation myth was taken up in the Icelandic sagas (Jesch, 2018, pp. 585–587). Scholars have increasingly questioned Harald's status as first king of Norway and even his existence (Jakobsson, 2002), which has implications for his ability to cause a mass exodus. The foundation story is likely reflective of Iceland's relationship with Norway in the 13th century, with increasing Norwegian interference which led to Iceland's loss of independence (Kreutzer, 1994, p. 461; Jakobsson, 2016, pp. 183–187). In contrast to fleeing tyranny, the Rus' origin legend in the 12th-century Russian or Slavonic *Primary Chronicle* claims that the dynasty of Rubik was invited to rule by local tribes who had unsuccessfully tried to govern themselves: 'The calling-in of the Varangians' served to justify the dynasty's dominance (Duczko, 2004, pp. 12, 78–79, 81, 255; Likhachev, 1970).

Other evidence suggests that the Rus' as a whole were a complex mix of Slavic, Scandinavian and other influences.<sup>2</sup> Thus, curation of Scandinavian heritage amount to dynastic or community origin myths.

The earls of Orkney were keen to emphasise their Scandinavian heritage in their genealogy. Their family origin legend in the 13th-century *Orkneyinga saga* deliberately supplies an alternative lineage from giants, the enemies of the gods from whom the Norwegian kings traced their ancestry. Thus, the earls claim descent from 'native northern giants', rather than 'immigrated southern gods', making them, as Ian Beuermann observes, 'more "Norwegian" than the kings of Norway' (Beuermann, 2011, pp. 116–117). Archaeological evidence, however, as argued by David Griffiths (2019, pp. 474–475), shows a clear Irish Sea component to the material culture of the earldom of Orkney. The Norman dukes presented themselves in a somewhat different manner to the Orcadian earls. Abrams (2013, p. 46) notes that Normandy 'seems the odd one out' as being the least 'Scandinavianized' of the settlements. Instead, literature commissioned by the dukes 'repackaged' Scandinavian heritage into a new identity as the *gens Normannorum* (Abrams, 2013, p. 64).<sup>3</sup> Aspects of Scandinavian identity were deployed to distinguish themselves from the Franks and their other neighbours (Cross, 2018, pp. 202–203).<sup>4</sup> Emphasising their descent from Rollo, the dukes overrode the memory of other vikings in early Normandy by monopolising the 11th-century written record, notably through Dudo of Saint-Quentin (Abrams, 2013, pp. 60–61, 64). There can therefore be a gulf between historical 'reality' and memory.

The Norman case highlights the fact that memories from within Scandinavian settlements are not inherent nor divorced from external influence. Cross (2018, pp. 202–203) argues that Norman depictions of Scandinavians originated not from memories carried by the earlier Scandinavian migrants but from Frankish and western Christian representations of vikings. Dudo's history and genealogy of the Normans draws on Latin Frankish traditions rather than Norse ones, without drawing on stock characters of Norse legend (Cross, 2018, pp. 58–59). Meanwhile, the Russian or Slavonic *Primary Chronicle* draws on traditions of Byzantine historiography and time-reckoning (Franklin & Shepard, 1996, pp. 317–319; Franklin, 2002). In England, a coherent Anglo-Scandinavian identity was arguably—and certainly terminologically—shaped by the dominant non-Scandinavian polity, Wessex. The term 'Danelaw' was not used until the 11th century by Wulfstan II, archbishop of York, who wrote the so-called 'Laws of Edward and Guthrum',<sup>5</sup> in which he 'aligned the regional difference in law with an ethnic boundary between English and Danes' (Cross, 2018, p. 198; Whitelock, 1941). The term is commonly used to refer to the area of Scandinavian settlement in northern and eastern England.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the Danelaw was essentially the 'creation of the West Saxon kings and their advisors', notably Wulfstan II, during attempts to integrate this area into the West-Saxon-ruled English kingdom (Cross, 2018, p. 194). To what extent this influenced conceptions in the Scandinavian-settled areas of England of their own ancestry is difficult to ascertain. Sculpture in northern England depicting scenes from Norse mythology testifies to their culture, and these stories were perhaps accompanied by oral legends which contributed to the surviving later written narratives (Parker, 2018, pp. 6–7).

Self-representation is particularly evident in naming practices, not only in legends. Most kings of Man and the Isles had Norse personal names, even in the 12th and 13th centuries, but the range of these names was quite limited (McDonald, 2015, p. 338). This perhaps suggests that they were deliberately chosen, rather than a broader range of names arising from spoken Norse. Scholars justifiably refer to their milieux as Gaelic-Scandinavian; the Isles were part of an interconnected hybrid Irish Sea culture (Edmonds, 2014). The early Kievan Rus' princes had names which were Norse in origin, notably Rurik (Rorik) and Oleg (Helgi), perhaps deliberately signalling Scandinavian heritage; after conversion to Christianity such names were still sometimes used, having become Slavicised and a traditional part of the dynasty's identity, but this corpus of Norse names did not increase.<sup>7</sup> In northern England, Norse personal names outlasted the Norse language and were even used into the early 13th century by the Yorkshire peasantry, making them the most persistent Scandinavian cultural feature (Townend, 2014, p. 222). The self-representation of Scandinavian ancestry among non-elites is less frequently glimpsed due to the nature of the available evidence.

### 3 | OUT OF HISTORICAL SIGHT: FORGOTTEN/UNMEMORABLE VIKINGS

Given the curated, selective nature of commemorations by Scandinavian settlements, it is necessary to also consider what was downplayed or not commemorated, which can instead be glimpsed from other forms of written and archaeological evidence. The potential unreliability of written sources from outwith Scandinavia and its settlements is well recognised.<sup>8</sup> These sources can nevertheless provide insight into what has been forgotten and what has been emphasised in Norse commemoration. Most 9th-century viking raids are known only due to non-Scandinavian annalistic sources. Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*, a missionary account, provides vital evidence for 9th-century Sweden including the names of otherwise unknown kings (Sawyer, 1988, p. 21). The presence of Norwegian prince Magnús Haraldsson in the British–Irish Isles in 1058 was forgotten in Scandinavian sources, perhaps because his line died out long before the Norse sagas were written: 'he was nobody's famous ancestor' (Woolf, 2007, p. 267). His expedition is recorded in the Irish annals, one recension of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Welsh annals and John of Worcester (Etchingham, 2001, p. 154). Unlike other Norwegian kings, Magnús has no surviving skaldic verse and no saga devoted to him: if Magnús had gone on to have a longer reign, this expedition might have featured in later saga narratives establishing his early heroism. Further, a Danish expedition against England in 1138 is known from only a single Flemish source (Heebøll-Holm, 2015). On a broader level, Arabic and Latin sources reveal viking raids in the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula, which are underrepresented in Norse accounts; this region also receives less scholarly attention than vikings in northern Europe, perhaps due to linguistic challenges for Norse scholars or because Iberian historiography has instead concentrated on the overarching conflict between northern Christian kingdoms and Muslim al-Andalus (Christys, 2015, pp. 2–3; N. Price, 2008).

Archaeological evidence too suggests interactions and settlements forgotten in the written sources. It is usually assumed that there was little Scandinavian impact on Wales. Excavations in 1994–2001 revealed a Scandinavian presence at Llanbedrgoch, on the isle of Anglesey, which was engaged in regional and long-distance trade (Redknapp, 2004). This discovery elicited discussion of a possible Scandinavian enclave in Flintshire, north-east Wales, where there are a couple of Scandinavian-style crosses (Griffiths, 2006, p. 156). The Atlantic coast of Ireland has likewise been overlooked given the distribution of Hiberno-Scandinavian towns. Eamonn P. Kelly assembled 'growing evidence for Scandinavian settlement along the Atlantic coast' of Ireland, even suggesting that forts in the area were a response to viking activity (Kelly, 2015, 290). Similarly, mounting data from stray finds, hoards and fortifications indicate a viking presence in the Netherlands, which had gone largely unrecognised previously (Besteman, 2004; Knol, 2010, p. 55; ten Harkel, 2013, p. 254). Historiographical assumptions (often unwitting) about the geographical spread of Scandinavian activity are being increasingly challenged as a result of archaeological evidence. The discovery in 2008 and 2010 of two ship burials at Salme, Estonia dating to c. 750 has even caused scholars to date the start of the Viking Age itself to earlier than has been previously assumed (Hedenstierna-Jonson, 2020, p. 12).

Despite the fact that the treaty of Alfred, king of the West Saxons, and Guthrum, who would rule East Anglia, is seen as 'the foundation document of the Danelaw' (Cross, 2018, p. 194), most discussion of the Danelaw focuses on Northumbria. While Scandinavian rule was admittedly short-lived in East Anglia, this area has been largely overlooked (Sandred, 1991, p. 324). Archaeological evidence, however, implies that the West Saxon or English hold over East Anglia was not as strong as early as has been supposed.<sup>9</sup> It has been argued that Scandinavian settlement in East Anglia was not as intense as in the northern Danelaw, partly due to fewer Scandinavian place-names (Davis, 1955, pp. 23–39). Kershaw's study (2013, p. 245) —made possible by the Portable Antiquities Scheme database of finds by the general public—found that Scandinavian-style and Anglo-Scandinavian jewellery predominated in East Anglia, especially Norfolk, although this area was previously 'viewed as peripheral to or even outside the Danelaw'. In contrast, Yorkshire and the East Midlands produced very few items of such jewellery, which is surprising given the usual academic focus on this as a core region of Scandinavian settlement (Kershaw, 2013, pp. 184–185, 245). This lack might partly be due to poorer reporting of metal-detected finds, but is

consistent with the profile from hoards and excavations: possibly settlement in Yorkshire was more militaristic and involved fewer Scandinavian women (Kershaw, 2013, pp. 181, 202, 205).

The extent to which different Scandinavian settlements were remembered is uneven. This might partly be due to the level of cultural impact resulting from contemporary historical conditions—the number of settlers (as once assumed), or the mechanics of settlement and integration—but might also be influenced by later politics and whether there was continued participation in the Norse cultural world. In Ireland, for example, the Scandinavian character of Hiberno-Scandinavian towns was diluted by Irish political control but their takeover during the Anglo-Norman invasion (1169–1171) and resulting settlement hastened their separation from the Norse-speaking world. In contrast to Ireland, a second wave of Scandinavian settlement in 11th-century England occasioned by the Danish conquest may have strengthened Scandinavian identity. Cross argues that Cnut's skalds invoked memories of Ívarr and the Great Army, justifying his interests by reference to the past (Cross, 2018, p. 203).

In terms of Norse sources, we are reliant on Iceland for its creation and preservation of manuscripts of the 13th century and later. This is particularly true for skaldic praise poetry from outside Iceland itself and Scandinavia—that is, from places where the Norse language eventually died out. There are several hints, such as fragments of whole poems and mentions of named but now lost texts, that the extant corpus of skaldic verse is not representative of that which existed, particularly in the case of Hebridean poetry. Thus, though few poems associated with the York–Dublin dynasty survive, Townend (2003, p. 60) notes that this 'absence constitutes no reason to doubt that such poems once existed'. A comedic episode in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* in which the king of Dublin is uncertain how to reward a skald for his poem reflects 13th-century Icelandic perception of the Dublin court, not reality (Ellis, 2020b, pp. 14–15). Any skaldic poetic tradition in Dublin 'failed to connect with the main Norwegian-Icelandic axis', thus dying out with Norse speech in Ireland (Townend, 2003, p. 67). I have argued that the weakening of Scandinavian identity in the Hebrides and the Hiberno-Scandinavian towns, alongside decreased connections with Iceland, impacted their presentation in Icelandic saga literature (Ellis, 2020b). Place name and linguistic experts debate whether the impact of the Norse language in Man was later masked by the so-called 'Gaelic revival', which followed the 1266 transfer of Man and the Hebrides from Norwegian to Scottish rule.<sup>10</sup> These examples align with Patrick Geary's description of the 'interplay of intentionality and serendipity, of remembering and of forgetting' (Geary, 1994, p. 26).

## 4 | REDISCOVERING THE VIKINGS: EARLY MODERN AND VICTORIAN NATIONAL MEMORIES

It is not just later medieval but early modern political and cultural issues that have influenced remembrance of Scandinavian heritage. The rediscovery of 'Viking' history occurred as their romantic image was embraced by the Victorians. Andrew Wawn suggests that 'those born, bred or based in the Danelaw areas of eastern England' felt a particular affinity with, and showed greater enthusiasm for, this 19th-century Scandinavian revival (Wawn, 2001a, pp. 357, 359). The Scandinavian heritage of Lakeland was imaginatively reconstructed by W. G. Collingwood (see Townend, 2009); this creativity suggests that the area's inhabitants did not have an innate ancestral connection with their Scandinavian past. The first national survey of Scotland, the Old Statistical Account (published 1791–1799), revealed regional variation in the 18th-century Scottish perception of Scandinavian incomers: in the Northern Isles and Caithness, Scandinavians were viewed positively as ancestors, but elsewhere, particularly north-eastern Scotland, viewed negatively as attackers, despite this area having comparatively little evidence of Scandinavian presence (Downham, 2011, pp. 55–56, 62). It was in the 19th century that Scotland as a whole began priding itself on its Scandinavian heritage due to popular tales by Walter Scott and others (Wawn, 2000, pp. 93–116).

The viking presence in North America receives a great deal of public and academic interest. Excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, in the 1960s apparently provided archaeological confirmation of the memory of Vinland or *Vinland* preserved in later sagas. Sverrir Jakobsson urges caution, noting that the Vinland sagas have

been considered from the point of view of American history, not in their own cultural context, while Norse travels to Vinland have become inextricably linked to the later so-called 'discovery' of America, which elevated European nations to world powers (Jakobsson, 2012, pp. 502, 512). In 1837, Carl Christian Rafn published pieces of the Vinland sagas and claimed to have identified Viking-Age artefacts across America's eastern seaboard. As the United States became more powerful, Victorian scholars were motivated to work on Vinland (Wawn, 2001b, pp. 194–197). Political and religious tensions contributed to Leifr Eiríksson being presented as the true 'discoverer' of America, rather than Christopher Columbus, who was claimed by America's Italian immigrants (Björnsdóttir, 2001). Rasmus Björn Anderson found a place for Norwegians in 'the New World' by writing them into the foundation story of America, which was taken up by 19th-century Scandinavian-American cultural politicians (Anderson, 1874; Mancini, 2002, pp. 686, 871). Similarly, Icelanders who migrated to Canada and the US, particularly 1870–1914, sought an 'ancestral connection' to their new home (Machan, 2020, p. 12). These issues are somewhat embodied in the Kensington Runestone, dubbed 'not an unimportant fake, but a central identity-bearing symbol in the history of the Nordic-American immigration' (Kjær, 1994, p. 27).<sup>11</sup> Long dismissed by the scholarly community, its authenticity is maintained—and indeed monetised—in Minnesota, home of the 'Vikings' American football team since 1960 (Barraclough, 2020, pp. 257–259). Viking-American identities have been constructed in areas with strong Scandinavian heritage in more modern times. The viking presence in America receives a disproportionate amount of attention given how short-lived the settlement was. Involving few people and inviable in the long term, it was not sustained (see Wallace, 2003). To Viking-Age Norse speakers, Vinland was simply an extension of the North Atlantic and not the discovery of a 'New World'.

In contrast, Russia's Scandinavian heritage was initially downplayed. Historiographical perceptions of the Rus', and their role in Russian ethnogenesis, have altered over the centuries, encapsulated in the Normanist versus Anti-Normanist controversy ('Norman' here meaning Scandinavian) which dominated scholarship of the latter half of the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>12</sup> In 1749/1750 Gerhard Friedrich Müller, official historiographer to the Russian Empire, wrote *Origines gentis et nominis Russorum*, arguing that the 'Varangians' referred to in the Russian or Slavonic *Primary Chronicle* were originally Scandinavian. Members of the Imperial Academy of Sciences found this insulting to Russia: 'Müller's dissertation was banned, he was demoted in academic rank, and his salary was halved' (Vukovich, 2019, July 26). The anti-Normanist position of Russian scholars like Mikhail Lomonosov insisted on the 'Slavic' character of Russians, denying any Scandinavian contribution in the creation of the Russian state. From the reign of Gustav Vasa (1523–1560) Sweden emerged as a great power and this involved regular tension and conflict with Russia. In particular, the 1741–1742 war between Russia and Sweden perhaps made the Russian Academy resistant to the idea of a Scandinavian conquest. The 'Normanist' controversy is not really controversial anymore: archaeological finds and written evidence clearly indicate Scandinavian influence on early Rus', although its precise extent and nature is still debated.

These examples are instructive of the impact of nationalist scholarship and of cultural developments, including just single authors or works of literature, on how the Viking Age is remembered. Additionally, they highlight how appreciation of Scandinavian ancestry fluctuates over time and across regions—a theme still relevant today.

## 5 | REGIONALISM, HERITAGE AND MODERN TRENDS

This section considers how modern scholars are wrestling with the legacies of early modern and modern nationalist and political developments. As well as different scholarly approaches, it further examines the variation in regionalised heritage. I argue that these two perspectives, in fact, influence each other and are mutually dependent.

The romantic stories of the 19th century had been accompanied by disturbing racial theories of Germanic supremacy. In cases such as Richard Wagner's these were combined, creating an enduring stereotype of how vikings looked. Ideas of Nordic racial superiority were taken up in Scandinavia too (Hochman, 2015; Kyllingstad, 2014). Nazi ideology also encouraged exaggeration of the Scandinavian contribution to their ally Russia, leading to archaeological investigations in the conquered Poland seeking to prove that it had previously

been settled and dominated by 'Germanic' peoples (Duczko, 2004, p. 4; Gardela, 2020, p. 51). There was a postwar backlash against Nazi appropriation of vikings, while developments in archaeology and better communication meant comparison of sites from different countries became more possible. Viking studies in postwar Communist-ruled Poland benefitted from contact and exchange with researchers in Scandinavia (Gardela, 2020, pp. 55–6). The Soviet Union's dissolution reinvigorated Belarusian and Ukrainian claims that they, not the Russians, were the real descendants of Kievan Rus'; Ukraine in particular has presented the Rus' as their state's forerunner and adopted Rus' symbols (Plokhyy, 2006, pp. 11, 16). In their study Franklin and Shepard (1996, p. xvii) make sure not to equate Rus' with Russia, Ukraine or Belarus. In Scandinavia, Germany, the UK and US, the recent revival of 'Norse' religion or Germanic neopaganism can be connected to an interest in ancestry and, in some cases, to nationalism and racism.<sup>13</sup>

To counter nationalist tendencies and simplistic views of vikings as homogenous, scholars have employed cross-national and decentred approaches. Nationalism in Scandinavian scholarship was rooted in an interest in state formation, but recent work highlights vikings' multivalent cultural expression and ethnicity across a wide geographical area (Downham, 2012, pp. 2, 8). In *Decolonising the Viking Age*, Fredrik Svanberg even argued against the existence of a shared 'Viking' culture at all (Svanberg, 2003). Svanberg (2003, vol. 1, pp. 101–2, 141–9; 2006, p. 301) likewise questioned the diversity and heterogeneity of religious belief and practice in pre-Christian Scandinavia being reduced to mere variation within a shared background. Spearheaded by Jesch (2015) and Abrams (2012) since the 2000s, the model of diaspora emphasises migration, cultural contacts and exchange. The concept of memory is 'central' to studying the Scandinavian vikings as a diaspora because, by definition, it involves migrants remembering their homeland (Jesch, 2008, p. 222). Recent scholarship has directly, critically engaged with the topic of race in the medieval period, including in Norse literature.<sup>14</sup> This has also been connected to post-colonial approaches (B. A. Price, 2020). Postcolonialism, along with the indigenous rights' movement, contributed to efforts to include the Sámi in scholarship on medieval Scandinavia, rather than viewing the Sámi and Norse as discrete.<sup>15</sup> Otaño Gracia (2019) has called for a racially aware and geographically expansive decentred Global North Atlantic approach to counteract stereotypes held by white supremacists.

One form of cross-national approach is analysing a maritime case study not a land-based one, dictated by sea-borne links rather than modern national borders. An Irish Sea region perspective on vikings, interconnected across political boundaries, has emerged in the last 50 years and accelerated in the last 20.<sup>16</sup> The Baltic Sea is another frame of reference current in Viking studies, increasingly prominent after Finland and the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) regained independence. Mägi (2018, p. 28) argues that the 'tendency to project the contemporary political situation back into history' explains why work on the Baltic previously focused on the relationship between Scandinavia and Russia, with little attention to the Baltic States in their own right until the last few decades. The Baltic has now been described as 'the centre of the Viking world' (Raffield, 2020, p. 31). Interpretations of Viking-Age communication in the Baltic have often been divided along national lines, particularly in the divergent perspectives of Scandinavian and Russian scholars (the western and eastern schools) on the Baltic; the same kinds of evidence are even interpreted differently in each individual Baltic State and in Finland (Mägi, 2018, p. 430). This may be due to which other countries they identify with culturally and which research institutions their scholars have connections to (Mägi, 2018, p. 3). Recent work emphasises that Viking-Age Scandinavians were just one group among Baltic, Finnish and West-Slavic peoples who had impacted this region; it further notes that even the individual islands in the Baltic developed their own culture.<sup>17</sup>

Another relevant development is the use of modern scientific techniques, particularly isotopic and genetic analyses, to assess the origin of human remains from viking sites and Scandinavian settlements abroad. Such studies demonstrate migration, but their precision is often limited: for example, the problems differentiating the DNA of Danish viking migrants from the Germanic origins of the existing English population (see Kershaw & Røyrvik, 2016). One isotopic investigation of three male skeletons from Dublin showed disparate origins, northern Scandinavia as well, perhaps, as local; while at Westness, Orkney a 'Viking' female had different non-Scandinavian origins to her male counterparts (Montgomery et al., 2014). Genetic studies suggests that the medieval Icelandic population was largely



a combination of Scandinavian and Gaelic, with the latter making a more substantial contribution to mitochondrial DNA (Ebenesersdóttir et al., 2018; Helgason et al., 2000). Several of these investigations confirm scientifically what previous scholarship already argued: heterogenous viking armies and settlements, cultural hybridity and constructed identities. A recent survey of the Viking world's genetic makeup emphasises movement in various directions, mixed ancestries and significant levels of non-Scandinavian DNA (Margaryan et al., 2020). The media attention this article received reflects the vikings' enduring appeal and a growing popular interest in genetic ancestry.

Modern-day interest in, and awareness of, Scandinavian ancestry and impact is regionally varied, particularly in the British-Irish Isles. As already noted, the surge in Victorian interest in the vikings was particularly strong in some regions of England. Ireland's Scandinavian heritage received greater recognition after the excavation of Wood Quay, Dublin, and a large unsuccessful campaign in the late 1970s to prevent development on the site; nevertheless, Dublin's viking connection is more widely appreciated than that of Munster's Hiberno-Scandinavian towns (Kirwan, 2014, p. 36). Corrections to such disparity are being achieved through recent work increasingly focused on regional impacts. The 2014 'Languages, Myths, and Finds: Translating Norse and Viking Cultures for the Twenty-first Century' project examined historical conditions but capitalised on the interest provided by modern regional identity. Despite evidence of settlement, the Scandinavian heritage of Cleveland and the Tees Valley area in northeastern England was infrequently acknowledged, both academically and popularly, especially in comparison with the area around York (Vohra, 2014, pp. 5–6). During this project, however, a runic inscription was discovered in Sockburn, County Durham, the details of which confirm contacts with Scandinavians in the Irish Sea region, likely the Isle of Man (Rye, 2017). Appreciation of the Wirral's viking history has grown due to high-profile archaeological finds and to genetic surveys (Griffiths & Harding, 2014, p. 27).

Variation in modern regional heritage can distort historical enquiry. Griffiths (2019, p. 468) notes that British regions which have maintained 'the strongest Scandinavian cultural connections into modern times—notably Orkney and Shetland—are often viewed unquestioningly as the locations of the earliest and most vigorous Viking settlement'. The Northern Isles are assumed to be the first area settled in the British-Irish Isles, which admittedly makes geographical sense as the likely first landfall for a ship from the west coast of Norway. A Scandinavian takeover of the Northern Isles is traditionally assumed, partly based on saga narratives, to have taken place around 800 (Harrison, 2013). Archaeological corroboration, however, 'of an early and dominant Viking presence has remained elusive' (Griffiths, 2019, p. 474). The later medieval earldom of Orkney stayed connected to Norse memory through contact with Iceland (Ellis, 2020b; Jesch, 2005, 2013). In all likelihood, this factored into perceptions of the early Scandinavian settlement.

The retention of a sense of Scandinavian heritage has sometimes been encouraged by modern issues of identity. Indeed, a recent study suggests that today 'possible Viking ancestry is a coveted identity', although it brings 'no immediate "pay off"' (Scully et al., 2016, pp. 164, 177). Whiteness is one possible benefit. The connection between vikings and white supremacy and neo-Nazism continues, with scholars endeavouring to counter misconceptions about the medieval past (Downham, 2017; Kim, 2019; Lewis-Simpson, 2020, pp. 561–562; Perry, 2017). The popular appeal of vikings, though, makes them a potentially profitable marketing and branding strategy (Boyd, 2020, esp. pp. 232–233; Dale, 2020). Regionalism comes into play once more. Tensions between the north and south of England have perhaps contributed to an emphasis on the former's Scandinavian heritage. For people in Yorkshire who coveted viking ancestry it appeared connected to their identity as 'Northerners'.<sup>18</sup> The promotion of Scandinavian heritage in the Northern Isles seems linked to feeling disconnected from mainland Scotland (Nihtenen, 2015, pp. 51–3). These islands were the last sovereign accessions to Britain after a long period of Norwegian (and Danish-Norwegian) rule.<sup>19</sup> In turn, emphasis in Scotland of its historic ties to Scandinavia, rather than England, has played into movements for Scottish independence from the United Kingdom and suggestions that Scotland should model itself politically on Scandinavian countries.<sup>20</sup> In the 1990s and 2000s, Polish scholars were keen to find Scandinavian connections, which is likely linked to seeking a shared viking heritage as Poland became closer to western Europe, including gaining European Union membership in 2004, and to the impact of western European popular culture (Gardeła, 2020, p. 58).

Unlike most other historic population groups, vikings have a clear 'brand identity' of recognisable attributes and optics, which underpins the curation of regional identities and the marketing of businesses and tourism (Townend, 2014, p. 227). This plays a major part in modern-day cultural memories of vikings and Scandinavian ancestry. The tension between these popular remembrances and methodological or theoretical scholarly innovations must be admitted and wrestled with.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

The sheer geographical spread of Scandinavians during the Viking Age enables us to see the multiplicity of memorialisation strategies and the idiosyncrasies in those strategies. The importance of ancestry has emerged, whether on a dynastic level, for example Magnús Haraldsson being forgotten, or, on a broader level, different settlements looking back to their roots. Cultural memory is, at best, selective. Sources from Scandinavian settlements are not the authentic voices of vikings, due to the lapse in time and to the external influences on the way they wrote their histories. Our knowledge of different parts of the Viking world is largely refracted through Iceland: continued participation in the Norse cultural milieu increased the chance of being remembered. Selective memorialisation during the later medieval period was so successful that it shapes the way we view the entire Viking Age to this day. Dominant narratives have minimised variation within a dynamic Viking world. Modern issues and identity have encouraged the retention of viking identity in some regions more than in others. Only by recognising the legacy of these historiographies can we improve modern historiography and the ways we participate in it.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Precise dating for the Viking Age is debated: it has been Anglocentrically dated to 793–1066 but in Scandinavia 750–1050 is more common. See Hedenstierna-Jonson (2020, p. 11); Ellis Nilsson (2016, pp. 693–4); Ellis (2020a, p. 1); Raffield et al. (2017, p. 315) and Jesch (2015, pp. 8–10). For definitions of, and explanations for, the Viking Age see: Ashby (2015; Barrett (2008); Barrett (2010); Sindbæk (2011); Aalto (2014).
- <sup>2</sup> Jonsson Hraundal (2014, p. 66) suggests that the Kievan Rus' were more Slavic than Scandinavian, while the Volga-Caspian Rus' were predominantly Scandinavian until becoming indistinguishable from the surrounding populations by the early 11th century.
- <sup>3</sup> McNair (2015) argues for an emphasis on viking heritage after perceived failure of Frankish assimilation.
- <sup>4</sup> Carpentier (2014, p. 212) argues against Scandinavian colonisation suggesting in reality vikings made only a passive contribution to the foundation of Normandy.
- <sup>5</sup> For usages see Edward-Guthrum 7.2 ('on Deone lage') and VI Æthelred 37 ('on Dena lage') in Liebermann (1903, pp. 132, 256, respectively).
- <sup>6</sup> See Hadley (2000); Holman (2001). For varying definitions, see Abrams (2001).
- <sup>7</sup> For Rus' naming practices see: Ostrowski (2011 pp. 239, 242–243); Litvina and Uspenskij (2017).
- <sup>8</sup> For more on these sources' exaggeration and stereotyping, see the accompanying piece to this article: Ellis (2021).
- <sup>9</sup> See Kershaw (2013, pp. 242–243). This is consistent with work on administration: Marten (2008).
- <sup>10</sup> Gelling (1978) suggested that there was little continuity between pre-existing Gaelic and later Gaelic from the revival due to Norse dominance, while Megaw (1976) argues that Gaelic was in continuous use, but that Norse was higher status.

- <sup>11</sup> Apparently unearthed in 1898 by a Swedish immigrant to central Minnesota, the Kensington stone's inscription purports to commemorate a 14th-century Scandinavian expedition to that region. It was most likely carved in modern times, however: the language fits a 19th-century context much more than a medieval one, while the rune-form seems to have been developed in 19th-century Dalarna, central Sweden (Williams, 2012, pp. 13–19).
- <sup>12</sup> For more see: Rogger (1960, pp. 186–252); Rahbek Schmidt (1970).
- <sup>13</sup> See Gregorius (2006, 2004). This revival is also linked to the rise of other alternative esoteric religions, including Romantic notions of pre-Christian indigeneity (von Schnurbein, 2016, esp. p. 54).
- <sup>14</sup> For example, Heng (2018); Cole (2016); Vidalín (2020).
- <sup>15</sup> See Ojala (2009, pp. 36, 42, 44–46). Notably, Neil Price included the Sámi, not just the Norse-speaking Scandinavians, in his investigation of pre-Christian beliefs and practices from its first edition (2002, esp. pp. 233–278).
- <sup>16</sup> For example, Smyth (1979); Clarke et al. (1998); Downham (2003); Hudson (2006); Griffiths (2010); Clarke and Johnson (2015).
- <sup>17</sup> Hedenstierna-Jonson (2020, pp. 18–20). See also Heininen et al. (2014, pp. 307, 312, 315).
- <sup>18</sup> Scully et al. (2016, p. 170). This was potentially also true during the Viking Age itself (Innes, 2000, pp. 69–70). For the perceived connection between 'Yorkshire-ness' and 'Viking-ness', see Scully et al. (2013, pp. 934–935).
- <sup>19</sup> They were only pawned to Scotland in AD 1468–1470. See Griffiths (2019, pp. 472, 474).
- <sup>20</sup> See Riddoch and Bort (2017); Abend (2015, September 18); *All Points North: The Scottish Government's Nordic Baltic Policy Statement* (2017), pp. 2, 10.

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